

# THE FINAL OUT

## MUSIC TO A SPORTS FAN'S EARS

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**W**hen I was younger, I used to wonder why my dad Gregorio would take us out to high school and college football games way before kickoff.

My dad, who was a member of the Martin High School and University of Texas marching bands, just wanted us to experience the pre-game fanfare provided by both the home and visiting team bands. He instilled in us a sense of respect and appreciation for how the musical component of these competitions greatly added to the tradition and lore of each school or college.

I was reminded of this a couple of weeks ago during the Laredo Theater Guild International's production of "Annie" at the Laredo Community College Guadalupe and Lilia Martinez Fine Arts center. My son, Alex portrayed "Rooster" in the show and he's always had a fine relationship with the musicians in the pit during this and past shows.

After posting photos of production on the LTGI's Facebook page, I was prodded to photograph the musicians in the orchestra pit. For this production, the musical team, lead by maestro Brendan Townsend, was named the "Easy Street Orchestra."

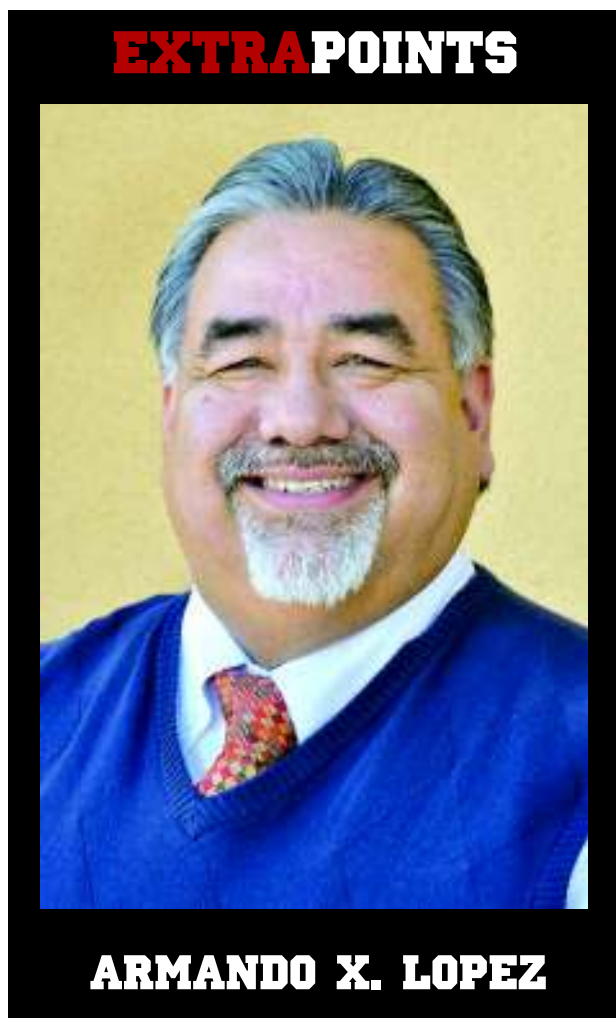
"Easy Street" is one of the rousing show tunes in the production performed by Melissa Barrera Gonzalez (Mrs. Hanigan) Stephanie Schneider Solis (Lilly) and my son Alex (Rooster).

At first, I was a little ambivalent about approaching Townsend because of his reputation for seeking out perfection in every aspect of the musical component of the show. I felt that my burly presence in the pit might disturb him or the other musicians.

To my gentle surprise, Townsend was receptive, and as far as I could tell, did not change any aspect of his routine while I was in the pit.

In "Annie," the music is essential to capturing the range of emotions of this joyous yet poignant tale of the ever-optimistic Annie as she follows her dream of being reunited with her biological parents. At every venue of her journey from a New York City orphanage, to a depression era Hooverville, to the stately estate of Oliver Warbucks, to the gilded streets of Manhattan, and to the White House, the music cues the audience to the emotions ranging from tears to utter glee.

Weary for football season to begin, I wondered if the similarities I saw between the orchestra and sports teams were mirages. But after living the night with the orchestra, I grew even more convinced that, though seeming disparate in every way, the musicians and the athletes share



much in common.

Once I got into the pit, the orchestra members, a smattering of high school students, band directors and music instructors began to warm up. The blast of the musical instruments, the plucking of strings, the plinking of keys and the tapping of drums were similar to the stretches and running exercises that athletes go through prior to a contest.

Next, Townsend went through a series of stretches that mirrored the gyrations of athletes preparing for competition.

Townsend, the conductor, then put on a headset with microphones that made him resemble a musical Bill Belichick during an NFL football game. His communication was with the technical crew behind the stage and in the control booth, similar to a coach's contact with other

coaches on the sidelines and in the stadium press box.

By this time, my inner chuckle gave into appreciation for what I had always believed. This performance was going to be just like many games that I had seen, necessitating timing, execution and leadership.

While I usually made my way to the theater during the long rehearsal process, I was aware that the orchestra was in a room working through the music. I knew what it would sound like, but this evening I would experience what it looked like.

The show was divided into two acts with an intermission that, to my children's rolling eyes, I have always called a halftime. I wasn't prepared for the physical energy that Townsend exudes as he bounces and bobs while signaling to the orchestra.

My fellow football fans would have agreed that his energetic conducting resembled the most elaborate of Peyton Manning's gesticulations during a Colts game.

Just as impressive was how effortlessly the musicians read the music, controlled their tempo and still found way to look at Townsend for direction.

The musicians were impressive in their virtuosity and versatility. Like football players who juggle different positions and responsibilities, a few showed their diversity. USD middle band director Chris Moore, for example, played at least three different musical instruments throughout the night and quickly pointed out that other musicians did the same during the show.

During the rare scenes with no music at all, the orchestra members lined up against the back wall of the pit, attempting to watch the actors execute their lines.

Many of the orchestra members mouthed the lines of the stage principals acting out the hilarious laugh-evoking gems that brought down the house.

The most impressive aspect of the evening, however, was how the musicians followed the playbook ... errrrr, the musical score, and executed each note with sonorous perfection.

While the NFL lockout was in progress, I used to lament the possibility of a season without football. At the conclusion of "Annie," I now wondered what NFL films would be without the music.

After the show, Townsend quipped that maybe the chair (sideline pass) I had sat in should be sold so that a theater patron could fully grasp the production's experience.

That seat, I can now argue, would be priceless.

There are no extenuating circumstances. ■